

The Maroons of Jamaica

On May 10, 1655, Admiral **William Penn** and General **Robert Venables** began their attack of Jamaica. The island was poorly defended. The Governor, Juan Ramirez was old and sick. Only five hundred (500) men could handle a gun. The English, on the other hand had had an army of eight thousand (8000), this included two thousand (2000) armed men, a stunning ratio of sixteen to one (16:1) in favour of the English.



Admiral William Penn

In desperation, the Spanish freed their slaves to help them fight. In return they were promised their freedom. In alliance with the Spaniards some of them formed settlements in the mountainous region of the Cockpits. Others in the face of defeat decided to escape to parishes such as Trelawney, Portland and St. Elizabeth where they formed independent settlements. The Spanish surrendered in 1660 after **Juan De Bolas** defected to the English. In 1670 by the **Treaty of Madrid** the island of Jamaica was officially ceded to England.

Why were the English and Maroon engaged in warfare against each other?

At first the English refused to recognize the escaped slaves (maroons) as free people. Instead, they enlisted the help of 'turncoats' such as **Juan De Bolas** to help them recapture the Maroons.

Anxious to become as wealthy as their Barbadian counterparts, they had begun to seriously operate sugar estates. They needed to constantly import slaves to work on these estates.

As long as the Maroons were 'at large', so to speak, they would be a source of inspiration for these slaves. This proved to be so true. During the seventy six years of irregular warfare between the English and the Maroons, many slaves ran away from their estates and joined the Maroons who gladly welcomed and provided a safe haven for them.

In the early years just after the English had captured Jamaica, the island was ruled by Commissioners. In 1663, one of these Commissioners, 'offered the Maroons land and full freedom if they surrendered. The Maroons thought about this.

The Maroons decided therefore that they needed 'something in print- in black and white' **before** they would even consider surrendering! They needed legal recognition of the land and the freedom that the English 'offered' them. For the next seventy-six years, therefore, they fought the English to give them this legal document.

Course of War

There were sudden and constant attacks on the plantations. The Maroons would set fire to the fields. The English in reply would also set fire to any Maroon settlement that they happened to find. Making sure that their provision grounds: source of food was destroyed.

The Maroons managed to secure various weapons during their raids on the plantations. These include: lances, machetes, and firearms.



Maroons

The Maroons raid sugar plantations taking away whatever useful supplies they could find. This includes tools such as machetes as well as food supply such as small livestock (fowl, pigs, etc.)

The Maroons gladly accepted any runaway slave especially the males who became a part of their army. Troops from Britain were sent to aid the local militia. This was not very successful as they unaccustomed to the climate, the long marches in difficult terrain and the Maroons' peculiar methods of fighting.



A fighting Maroon

The Maroons perfected the art of guerilla warfare. They would cover themselves in bushes and leaves from head to toe. Then they would hide themselves (camouflage) among the trees. From this vantage point they set ambush for their enemies.

In addition the Maroons employed a lookout. He or she would be placed at a strategic spot. This person was responsible for alerting the others when the enemy was approaching with the use of an abeng, conch shell or drum.

The English employed Mosquito Indians famous for their ability to track down fugitives. In addition they used dogs to ensure that they could detect the Maroon hideouts which were so cleverly concealed.

1734 Captain Stoddart launches a successful attack against Nanny Town. Using swivel guns and explosives he demolishes the settlement. Some villagers in their haste to escape jumped over a nearby cliff to their death.